



Microlabs

Developed by Julian Weissglass for the National Coalition for Equity in Education based at the University of California, Santa Barbara; adapted in the field by educators.

Purpose

Microlabs addresses a specific sequence of questions in a structured format with small groups, using active listening skills.

Time

About 8 minutes per question — this works best with a series of no more than 3 questions.

Group Format

Form triads — either with the people you're sitting near, or find others in the group you don't know well.

Getting Ready

The Facilitator spends time developing a sequence of questions that are appropriate to the purpose or focus of the conversation. The questions and their sequence are important. Consider how one question leads to another and increases reflection and risk.

Process

The facilitator says, "A series of questions will guide our discussion. Each person will have one minute (or sometimes, 2 minutes depending on the group and the questions) to respond to the question when it is their turn. While the person is speaking, the other two in the group will simply listen. When the time is up, the next person speaks, and so on. I'll let you know when it is time to switch." (It may be helpful to have a chime or audible signal.)

Emphasize the importance of honoring time: both bringing responses to a close when time is called and allowing for silence when a responder does not fill their time. Ask participants to number off within their triad #1, 2, and 3. Read the first question aloud twice. Offer a minute of "think time" to think and/or write in preparation. Be certain to tell the participants which order they will speak, and you might vary the order of each question. For example, begin with person #1, then #2, then #3. On the second question, begin with #2, then #3, then #1. On the third question, begin with #3, then #1, then #2.

Debrief

- What did you hear that was significant? What key ideas or insights were shared?
- How did this go for you? What worked well, and what was difficult? Why?
- How might your conversations have been different had we not used this protocol?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of using this activity? When would you use this protocol?
- What would you want to keep in mind as someone facilitating this activity?



Microlab Guidelines

These guidelines and questions were adapted from those developed by Julian Weissglass for the National Coalition for Equity in Education based at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The purpose of the Microlab protocol is to address a specific sequence of questions in a structured format with small groups, using active listening skills. The Microlab is useful for team-building and democratizing participation because it asks that participants equalize communication and withhold judgment. It affirms people's ideas and build community while addressing specific content issues.

1. Each person has equal time to talk.
2. The listener(s) should not interrupt, interpret, paraphrase, analyze, give advice or break in with a personal story while the speaker is talking.
3. Confidentiality should be maintained, unless the group decides to debrief the content of the questions.
4. The speaker should not criticize or complain about the listener(s) or mutual colleagues during his or her turn.

These guidelines are also appropriate for Equity Diads.